

## DOINGS OF THE VAN LOONS



No, Mother hasn't made any change as yet

## The Fatal Gift

By GEORGE ALLAN ENGLAND.

Author of "Darkness and Dawn," "The Empire in the Air," "The Golden Bough," "The After-Glow," "Beyond the Great Oblivion," "The Crime-Detecter," etc.

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## PREFATORY NOTE.

In presenting this unusual story to our readers we would like to give a little information concerning the peculiar manner in which it came to be written. Perhaps by doing so some further data may be brought to light, and more knowledge may be gained regarding certain still obscure details.

On January 8, 1915, a letter was received from a member of the Legion of Honor, Mr. Everett O. Hawley, of Hampton, Connecticut, stating that he had recently bought a rather singular volume at an auction held at the Perham farm, Howard's Valley, near Hampton. This volume he described as the diary of a woman named Myrah Bloss, deceased.

Miss Bloss had been a trained nurse, and later a physician. She had left a remarkable narrative in her memoirs, so he said. He seemed to believe the diary contained the elements of a big story, and offered it.

The diary, when it arrived, proved to be a curious document of fascinating interest, though somewhat fragmentary in places. The first few pages were gone. Arrangement with Mr. Hawley were made for the privilege of using it.

With the book—a small ledger, canvas bound—came a photograph of a most extraordinarily beautiful woman. This portrait, charmed on the edges, and badly wrinkled, had obviously suffered much abuse. It seems to substantiate the truth of the narrative, which, moreover, appears to be perfectly straightforward, consistent, and valid.

Mr. George Allan England was commissioned to undertake the work of reconstructing the story. Mr. England went to Hampton to investigate the origin of the diary, and, if possible, to get some facts about its author.

He interviewed Mr. Hawley, Mr. Perham (owner of the farm where the book had been found), and some others. He found that Miss Bloss, retiring after an active life, had lived for three years and eight months on the Perham farm; that she had been melancholy and depressed, subject to unexplained "spells" of weeping; that she had done a good deal of writing, and that she had died at the age of fifty-three on August 18, 1897. He also found and identified her grave in the Litchfield cemetery, near Hampton.

No relative attended the funeral. Miss Bloss seems to have been of a New Hampshire family, but nothing of them is yet known. Cause of death is entered on the Hampton town-records as pernicious anemia complicated by nervous breakdown.

Mr. England has been obliged to invent the prologue to this story, as nothing appears in the Bloss diary previous to the 2nd of March, 1892. From that point onward, however, he closely follows the known facts. The story can, therefore, be accepted as essentially true in all its major features.

If any of our readers possess any information, clippings, letters, or other data that might shed further light on the case, explain any of its puzzles, or offer any facts as to the characters of the persons involved—with especial reference to the woman known as Alexandra—Mr. England would appreciate receiving such information.

Please address all communications to Mr. England, Box 431, Springfield, Mass.

"The Fatal Gift" is an extraordinary tale. Were it not so strongly buttressed by documentary proof it might well be considered another ingenious invention of Mr. England's somewhat violent imagination. This time, however, England has apparently followed the lead of sober truth.

Does "The Fatal Gift" prove the ancient saw that truth is sometimes stranger than fiction?

**PROLOGUE.**  
It was only toward the end of March, 1892, that Vitali Erzazy and Andre Broderer obtained the consent of the woman known as Alexandra to under-

take the extraordinary experiment. Until that time—long as she seems to have known both men, and closely bound in ties of friendship as all three seem to have been—she had apparently declined to let them employ her as their subject.

Tempting though the lure was, some fatalistic tinge of soul, characteristic of the Slav, had seemingly repelled her from the idea of interfering with the endowments that nature had bestowed upon her. But finally Erzazy's argument, seconded by the vivid pictures of world fame painted by Broderer's unusual imaginative power, swayed her from her attitude of opposition.

The final interview took place some time near the 26th of March in Alexandra's apartment at 115 West One Hundred and Sixth street, close to the park. For half an hour the physicians had been besieging Alexandra with their plain arguments and persuasions. And at the end the Frenchman passionately cried, flinging out his supple right hand in a gesture of appeal.

"Beauty! Beauty such as poets have never sung nor sculptors molded! Beauty such as the world has never seen! Beauty beyond the dreams of high Olympus! Beauty supreme and indescribable! We offer you all this—and more!"

As she sat in her low wicker chair before the fire he paused before her, and gazed on her with eyes that glowed with infinite enthusiasms. His restless pointing of the little drawing-room interrupted, he remained there looking at the woman, judging her anew by the firelight that illumined her face in the dusk of the March evening.

From without drifted muted sounds of the city's travail and unresting life—a clack, clack, clack of hoofs from the asphalt, the jangle of an ambulance-gong, the confused, dull rumor of the metropolis, which even then, more than twenty years ago, thrived with restless pulse of activity.

But within all was tranquilly quiet. A perfumed calm ruled the apartment—a calm hastily punctuated by the ticking of the Louis Quinze gold clock on the fireplace—a calm in which sat and mused Alexandra in the fire-glow.

Smiling a little sadly she sat there, gazed into the flames, and made no answer for a while. What may not her thought have been?

Vitali Erzazy, seated by the table on whose polished top were piled American and foreign books, reviews, and music, lighted another cigarette with a nervous hand. He crossed one thin leg over the other and peered at Alexandra through his gold-rimmed glasses with eyes whose pupils showed a strange contraction.

A fire of eagerness burned in those peculiar eyes. Momentarily he fingered his close-cropped, black beard.

"Alexandra!" he exclaimed. "You answer!"

The woman shrugged her beautiful shoulders, half revealed through the lace of her gown, but said no word.

"Beauty!" cried Andre. "We offer you exquisite beauty—and you have no reply to give us?"

She smiled up at him a little sadly, with a vast, vague doubt in her dark eyes.

"You ask an answer?" she returned. "How can I give one to a question such as that?"

Her English was perfect, rendered more charming still by that intangible foreign accent.

"Why can you give none? Why not, pray?" demanded the Frenchman eagerly.

"Ah, mon ami, how little you understand the heart and soul of a woman! What daughter of Eve will openly admit that she is not already—"

"You misunderstand, Alexandra!" he interposed with characteristic impetuosity.

"No, Andre. On the contrary, your proposals tell me only too plainly the unwelcome truth."

"Listen, Alexandra, I beg you! Charm you have—manner, poise, attraction, yes. But—why not be frank? La beauté, no, not quite. Nature has endowed you with much—with vast resources, with irresistible attractions—but has left her task a little incomplete. We, Vitali and I, offer to finish the picture. What is all?"

"To what end?"

"That you may have perfection; that we may have helped create perfection; that the world may see perfection and rejoice, sing you, praise you, worship you!"

"Impossible," she objected, shaking her head, its shapeliness enhanced by the long and heavy braids of hair—glossy as a blackbird's wing—wound about in the charming Russian fashion. "Perfection does not exist, and never can."

Vitali Erzazy laughed and blew a

thin smoke vapor.  
"Dear Alexandra," said he, "suspend your judgments. Only wait till we have remodelled you nearer to the heart's desire, to quote the Persian ten-maker. Then tell us there is any impossibility!"

"Perfection is but the incarnation of the ideal. In you that ideal lies dormant, Alexandra; and in us lie the skill, the knowledge, the patience, and the faith to incarnate it—to make it a reality—to bring the whole world to your feet!"

"Only a Slav could have said that!" she smiled. "I think I begin to understand you, Vitali. In a way I seem to grasp your thought better than I do Andre's. You and I are of kindred blood. Maybe you can make

your purpose clearer than he has been able to do?"

Erzazy pondered a moment, then answered:  
"Alexandra, we are actuated by a wonderful hope, vision, dream, ideal, or whatever you choose to call it. Our work with you will not be personal. Personal in one sense, yes; but in its inner significance, vastly greater, deeper, and nobler."

"Our purpose is to give to the world, the human race, a vision of what may be when knowledge such as ours is known to others, taught and trained by us—to uplift the world, elevate our race, and confer on it the gift of gifts—beauty!"

"And I am to be the instrument of your teaching?"

"Of our teaching, through your in credible beauty yet to be!"

"A martyr, perhaps? No!" she objected in the strongest of Russian negations. "No! Not that! There will be risks—fearful risks of irreparable damage, of death, perhaps. Somehow, I do not feel in me the stuff whereon martyrdom is wrought."

"Risks?" cried Andre. "None whatever! Success is positively certain!"

"Even so," she answered. "I am too much the fatalist to interfere with nature. Perhaps the beauty now destined me may be mine in some future incarnation; but in this life—"

"Alexandra, mon ami, we can re- create you here—now!"

"In perfect beauty?"

"Absolutely! You recognize the truth about yourself as Vitali here has stated it, do you not? Let us cast aside the futile conventions of polite usage and tell you the actual facts. If a friendship of ten or fifteen years cannot bring us all three close enough together for plain speech, the world is a misnomer."

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